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RUINS OF THE CERRO DE MONTEZUMA

By A. H. BLACKISTON

The ruins of the fortifications and so-called watch-tower that crown the summit of the Cerro de Montezuma, southwest of and overlooking the remains of the famous Casas Grandes of Chihuahua, Mexico, have received as a rule but imperfect notice from the travelers and explorers who from time to time have visited this section. With the exception of the description in Bandelier's Final Report on Investigations in the Southwest¹ — an excellent account in many particulars — and that in the Archives de la Commission Scientifique du Mexique, the descriptions of these ruins are either of a very meager nature or are decidedly misleading. Escudero briefly mentions them as partaking of the nature of a fortified watch-tower, and notes a number of lines of stone on the southern slope of the mountain; Clavigero, who never saw the ruins, gives a far from satisfactory though better description than Bancroft seems to suspect, but speaks of them as being defended on one side by a high mountain; Bartlett viewed them from a distance, while Lumlholtz climbed the steep ascent but apparently lacked either time or inclination for a detailed account. The *Albun Mexicano* also speaks of this monument as a fortress built of great stones, though it soars into the imaginary when alluding to walls 20 feet thick, and to the destruction of the buildings for the sake of the stone they contained — a manifest absurdity when it is learned that the stones are uncut and that the entire space between this point and the nearest habitations is covered with a superabundance of similar rock. And, indeed, even were this not the case, the task of removing stone from these ruins would prove of Herculean proportions for the somewhat shiftlessly inclined native of to-day.

Accompanied by a Mexican guide who did not display an unnecessary amount of enthusiasm, the writer crossed the plain and

¹ Papers of the Archæological Institute of America, Am. Series, IV, pt. 2, Cambridge, 1892.

successfully climbed the Cerro de Montezuma, then veiled in clouds, though at times it was necessary to lead the horses and at others to encourage their exhausted spirits with an energy which we little felt like expending. A piercing wind swept across the crest and carried the snow in swirling eddies into the depths beyond, while the clouds, perceptibly thinning as we neared the top (the upper stratum having been reached), left a comparatively clear but by no means comfortable field for exploration.

About two miles southwest of the Casas Grandes lies the base of the mountain that forms the culminating peak of the range which borders the western side of the Casas Grandes valley, and upon which are situated the ruins that form the subject of this paper. An ancient road approximately six miles long leads from the former ruins to the summit of the mountain, winding around the precipitous sides and forming by far the most feasible route of ascent. In the lowlands its traces are faint and frequently lost, but higher it is not only most distinct, but for the greater part of its length has been either walled in along the exposed portions or cut into the mountain side. In sections the trail is from seven to eight feet wide, in others much narrower, preserving as a whole a uniform grade, though local conformations sometimes make an abrupt ascent imperative, but even then all obstacles were met with consummate skill. The most pronounced place of this character is at the point where the road enters the northern end of the platform from whose southern extremity rises the peak crowned by the main ruins.

This step or bench runs out into a bold promontory, and it is here that the "road of the Montezumas," as the natives term it, after many short, sharp turns and steep ascents among the great boulders, enters through a natural gateway in the rock, the village that grimly lies across its path. Every foot of this approach is commanded by fortifications placed in a manner that excites admiration, and in fact the entire village seems to have partaken of a military character, as it is most ably defended by walls and parapets of stone.

The houses, solidly built of the same material, are roofless, and in but a fair state of preservation, with the walls still standing to

the height of from 2 to 4 feet. Their number is about twenty-two, and among them are several of circular construction, one of which measures 19 feet 2 inches in diameter with walls 2 feet 10 inches thick. Near the center of the village is a large circular basin or depression 67 feet in diameter, on which opens a number of structures, the measurement of the best preserved one being 11 feet 3 inches in length, 5 feet 5 inches in width, with walls 2 feet thick. This ruin, once probably a store-house of some kind, had foundations of adobe rising about 2 feet from the floor—the only instance in which this material was observed. A depression similar to the large one just described, located in a village ruin many miles toward the headwaters of the Piedras Verdes river, was likewise examined by the writer. Regarding the original character of these basins but little can be said beyond the advancement of the theory that they were courts, the sides of which had been elevated by the falling walls of the surrounding houses. That they were reservoirs is hardly probable, as in the case first cited the necessary water supply for a receptacle of the size was lacking, while in the latter an abundance of water was near at hand.

But by far the most striking object in these ruins is the great stone wall running in a northwesterly-southeasterly direction along the eastern escarpment of the plateau, and measuring between 300 and 400 feet long, 5 feet thick, and more than 6 feet high on the outer side. Toward the central section project the ruins of what seems to have been a very formidable tower or redoubt, 18 feet in diameter, encircled at a lower level by an outer wall of great strength.

The inhabitants of this place exhibited a keen appreciation of its defensive possibilities and literally left no stone unturned to render it as nearly impregnable as possible. In the valley adobe was exclusively used as a building material, but here, with the exception noted, undressed stone solidly and neatly laid, as far as observed, without mortar, was exclusively employed, the individual stones averaging 1 foot long by 7 or 8 inches in thickness, and 3 or 4 inches in width, though in some cases, notably in the parapets, they reached much greater proportions. Indeed in one place the writer noticed two boulders each about 5 feet high.

Approximately 200 feet to the south of the village, near the point where the road begins to make the final ascent to the summit, lies a circular mass of stone 14 feet 5 inches in diameter, probably the remains of a tower, the location of which is significant as from a military point of view it could have been of but little service. The use to which it was devoted was evidently of a formal or religious nature, and probably bore an important relation to the ruins on the nearby peak between which and the village it formed the connecting link.

After passing along the crest of the plateau, past the solitary tower, the road clings to the precipitous western face of the mountain and finally, becoming smaller and less clearly defined, at a distance of half a mile reaches the summit.

Here on the very crest of the peak and around its sides, 2,000 feet above the valley, in an unsurpassed situation, lies a ruin of great interest. A circular wall, 56 feet 2 inches in diameter, incloses the remains of a tower or building 18½ feet square, whose sides, 2½ feet in thickness and from 4 to 6 feet high, face the cardinal points of the compass as in the case of the valley ruins, of the Casa Grande on the Gila river, and of the palaces and temples of Palenque and Mitla. To the east a projection about 10 feet wide with walls 1½ feet thick runs to the encircling wall which at this point is 5 feet 4 inches wide, while to the west its width is but a little more than 4 feet; the height of this wall is 6 feet.

Outside of this is another encircling wall, inclosing the inner one at a distance of 36 feet on the western and 64 feet 4 inches on the southern side. It varies in thickness from 1 foot 3 inches to 2 feet 7 inches, being thickest to the north and east. Strong outlying walls are numerous on the northern slope where several extensive works of this nature lie between the summit and the village, while a number of roads or trails lead in various directions to the lowlands, the most important being the one already described.

Though there seem to have been far too few houses to shelter the garrison that must have been required to man effectively such extensive works, however large or small the number, the problem of an adequate water supply must of necessity have been of vital

importance. This need was probably satisfactorily met by means of a spring which, my guide informed me, was situated below the parapet where the road entered the village, but which the writer was unable to find on account of the depth of snow at this point. Two reservoirs were cut in the rock near the lower ruins to provide an additional supply of water.

We now come to the point of greatest interest in connection with these ruins, and one which in time may cast much light on the nature of the early culture of this region. About 90 feet down the western slope an opening that had been walled in was discovered a few years ago. With the dazzling beacon of buried treasure ever before their eyes, luring them farther into the heart of the mountain, several of the whites of this section began the task of opening the tunnel, which they found most solidly blocked. Up to the present time they have blasted their way along 135 feet of its length and have found that this subterranean passage descends by irregular gradations to a point directly under the ruins on the summit; what lies at the end of the tunnel is yet unknown. No signs of ore deposits or other indications of the presence of a mine have been encountered.

These features, taken in connection with other distinctive features later to be enumerated, seem to leave but little doubt that this ruin fulfilled a rôle other than that of a mere watch-tower, though from the great expanse of territory stretching before the eye from its elevation (a view which unfortunately the writer was obliged to miss) it is not to be supposed that this feature was by any means ignored.

Popular tradition among the natives unhesitatingly proclaims the remains to be the palace of the great king who reigned from these heights over the inhabitants of the Casas Grandes — a regal throne indeed, with its head among the clouds and its foot upon the golden maize fields of the valley. But popular tradition often lacks in accuracy what it supplies in imagination, and this case is not an exception. For it is probable that religion was the only great monarch that ruled from these ancient ruins, even as in many forms it has ruled before and since from the temples of the Old World and the New, from Thebes and Babylon, from Teotihuacan and Pachacamac.

For wherever his habitat or whatever his color, man is much the same throughout the world.

The elaborately constructed road would in itself seem to countenance the theory of religious origin — a mere watch-tower would need no such pathway ; while the extensive system of fortifications, the orientation of the crowning tower, its eastward projection, the tunnel under it, and the nature of the village guarding the entrance to the plateau, all point to the same conclusion.

That there was direct communication, religious as well as military, between these ruins and those of the valley, there is little doubt, but whether this partook of the sanguinary nature of the worship of Huitzilopochtli or of the complacent character of the Peruvian pantheon, it is impossible to conjecture. The past still veils in deep uncertainty the true signification of these remains, but it may yet be found that the key to the culture of the inhabitants of the Casas Grandes lies deep in the heart of the Cerro de Montezuma.